

MOLDOVA 2021 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution protects the right of individuals to practice their religion and states religious groups are independent from the state and free to organize and operate according to their own statutes. The law cites the “exceptional importance” of Orthodox Christianity. The Falun Dafa and Falun Gong Associations continued to freely practice after reregistering as religious organizations in 2020. On October 12, the Ministry of Justice removed the Falun symbol from its register of extremist material, implementing a 2020 Supreme Court of Justice order to do so. In June, the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) fined the government for violating the European Convention on Human Rights when it earlier decided to dissolve the two associations. Most churches belonging to the Moldovan Orthodox Church (MOC), Bessarabian Orthodox Church (BOC), and other religious denominations continued to hold services throughout the year, with some observing the pandemic-related restrictions decreed by the Extraordinary National Public Health Commission. However, according to media reports, these requirements were not fully observed in some Orthodox churches, which were often overcrowded and did not require congregants to wear masks. In June, the Orhei office of the government’s Public Services Agency (PSA) rejected an application by the Jewish Community of Moldova (JCM) to register a synagogue in Orhei city. In October, the government approved the construction of a Holocaust memorial in Orhei, to be built with municipal funds. Leaders of the Islamic League reported no further developments in the “unprecedented” police investigation of the league’s finances and assets, which began in 2020; they stated they believed the investigation was closed in April due to lack of evidence. Jehovah’s Witnesses leaders reported that all their cases related to zoning permits were resolved and that they completed construction of all the Kingdom Halls they planned to build throughout the country. The Union of Pentecostal Churches said it remained unable to obtain a zoning permit from local government officials for a building it used for religious services in Copceac village and was seeking an alternative location for its church. Religious minorities continued to report no progress in obtaining government restitution or compensation for property confiscated prior to the country’s independence in 1991. On October 18, the Supreme Court of Justice overturned a 2020 ruling by a lower court and ordered a retrial in an ongoing legal dispute between the MOC and BOC concerning which Church should control more than 800 monasteries and churches considered national heritage monuments; in 2003 and 2008, the government transferred control of these to the MOC. Minority religious groups reported a general improvement in the authorities’ attitude

towards religious groups in the country, improved societal acceptance of those groups, and an easing of the preferential treatment state institutions traditionally provided to the MOC. Former president Igor Dodon and his Socialist Party often expressed support for Orthodox Christianity, particularly during the campaign for July 11 snap parliamentary elections.

In the separatist Transnistria region, Jehovah's Witnesses said they remained unable to reregister as a religious organization with de facto authorities and faced problems with conscientious objection to military service. There were two active cases in Transnistrian "courts" filed by Jehovah's Witnesses members forced to serve alternative civilian service in defense-related institutions, contrary to their beliefs. The Muslim community remained unable to secure a site for a mosque in Transnistria after receiving a permit for one in 2019.

There were instances of online hate speech against minority religious groups and vandalism of their properties. The JCM reported antisemitic rhetoric on the internet and one case of discrimination against a rabbi in a public park in Chisinau. The BOC again reported harassment by the MOC as well as by local officials in several communities. The MOC said that MOC-BOC conflicts were at the local level and caused in some cases by individual priests' reluctance to abide by Church disciplinary sanctions, according to sources. Numerous property disputes from prior years between the MOC and BOC remained unresolved in the courts. Several minority religious groups reported fewer or no cases of discrimination or harassment, which they attributed to continued COVID-19 restrictions that shifted attention away from religious minorities, as well as a higher level of societal acceptance of minority religious groups.

The Ambassador and other U.S. embassy officials urged the government to advance efforts to provide restorative justice for Holocaust victims and their families, including the return of historic cemeteries, synagogues, and yeshivas, and the creation of a Museum of Jewish History as a space of worship, reflection, and remembrance. The Ambassador and other senior embassy staff urged "authorities" in Transnistria to respect the rights of religious minorities. The embassy provided an additional \$290,000 through the Ambassadors Fund for Cultural Preservation for the last phase of restoration of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary Orthodox Church in Causeni. Embassy officials held virtual meetings with religious leaders to encourage respect and tolerance for all religious groups and to highlight religious freedom as a U.S. government priority policy goal.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the population at 3.3 million (midyear 2021). According to the 2014 census, the most recent available and which does not include Transnistria, the predominant religion is Orthodox Christianity, with 90 percent of the population belonging to one of two Orthodox Christian Churches. Most Orthodox adherents (approximately 90 percent) belong to the MOC, which is subordinate to the Russian Orthodox Church; the remaining 10 percent belong to the BOC, which falls under the Romanian Orthodox Church. Nearly 7 percent of the population does not identify a religious affiliation. The largest non-Orthodox religious groups, accounting for 15,000 to 30,000 adherents each, are Baptists, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Pentecostals. Estimates of the Jewish population vary widely, ranging from 1,600 to 30,000 persons. According to the JCM, there are approximately 20,000 Jews. Groups that together constitute less than 5 percent of the population include Seventh-day Adventists, evangelical Christians, Roman Catholics, Lutherans, Muslims, and atheists.

Smaller religious groups include Baha'is, Molokans, Messianic Jews, Presbyterians, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, the Salvation Army, the Evangelical Christian Church, the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification (Unification Church), other Christians, Falun Gong, and the International Society of Krishna Consciousness.

In the separatist Transnistria region, de facto authorities estimate 80 percent of the population belongs to the MOC. Other religious groups in the region include Catholics, followers of Old Rite Russian Orthodoxy, Baptists, Seventh-day Adventists, evangelical and charismatic Christians, Jews, Lutherans, Muslims, and Jehovah's Witnesses.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution stipulates the state shall recognize and guarantee all citizens the right to preserve, develop, and express their religious identity. It provides for equal treatment for all citizens regardless of religion and guarantees freedom of conscience, manifested in "a spirit of tolerance and mutual respect," and of religious worship. It stipulates religious groups are independent from the state and free to organize and operate according to their own statutes. The constitution prohibits all religious groups, in their mutual relationships, from using, expressing, or inciting hatred or enmity. The constitution stipulates the state shall support

religious worship, including facilitating religious assistance in the army, hospitals, prisons, nursing homes, and orphanages.

The law states every person has the right to belong or not belong to a religion, to have or not have individual beliefs, to change religion or beliefs, and to practice religion or beliefs independently or as a group, in public or in private, through teaching, religious practices, or rituals. According to the law, religious freedom may be restricted only when necessary to ensure public order and security, to protect public health and morality, or to protect a person's rights and freedoms. The law also prohibits discrimination based on religious affiliation.

The law stipulates that the state recognizes the “exceptional importance and fundamental role” of Orthodox Christianity, and particularly the MOC, in the life, history, and culture of the country.

The law does not require religious groups to register, and members of unregistered groups may worship freely. Religious groups that seek to register with the government must do so with the PSA. Only religious groups registered with the PSA possess status as legal entities, which allows them to build houses of worship, own land for cemeteries or other property, publish or import religious literature, open bank accounts, or employ staff. Registration also exempts registered religious groups from land taxes and property taxes and allows them to establish associations and foundations. The law permits local registered religious groups to change their denominational affiliation or dissolve themselves.

The law allows individuals to redirect 2 percent of their income tax to nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) or religious groups. Religious groups wanting to benefit from the provision must be officially registered with the PSA and active for a minimum of one year before applying for the income tax benefit; use the funds received only for social, moral, cultural, and/or charitable activities and certain administrative costs; and present reports on the use of the funds. The law exempts religious organizations from registration fees and from paying tax on the income received as donations under the 2 percent law.

Under the law, a religious group wishing to register must present to the PSA a declaration including its exact name, fundamental principles of belief, organizational structure, scope of activities, financing sources, and rights and obligations of membership. The law also requires a group to show it has at least 100 founding members. A religious group must present proof it has access to premises where it can conduct religious activities, but it does not need to own this

property. The PSA is required by law to register a religious group within 15 days if the registration request meets all legal requirements. The applicant may request an extension if the government determines the documentation submitted is insufficient.

Under the law, the Ministry of Justice has the right to request a suspension of the registered status of a religious group if it “carries out activities that harm the constitution or laws” or “affect state security, public order, [or] the life and security of the people.” The law also provides for suspension or revocation of a religious group’s registration in case of violation of international agreements or for political activity.

The law prohibits religious entities from engaging in political activity or “abusive proselytism,” defined as the action of changing religious beliefs through coercion.

The constitution provides for freedom of religious education and stipulates the state educational system should be secular. According to the law, religion classes in state educational institutions are optional. Students may submit a written request to a school’s administration to enroll in a religion class. Religion classes are offered in grades one through nine. The religious curriculum offers two types of courses: one for Orthodox denominations and Catholics, and the other for evangelical Christians and Seventh-day Adventists. The religious curriculum for Orthodox and Catholic groups derives from instructional manuals developed by the Ministry of Education, with advice from the MOC, and includes teaching guidelines developed with the support of the BOC. Regular teachers and MOC and BOC priests teach these optional courses, which focus on Orthodox Christianity. Regular teachers and representatives of the Evangelical Christian Church teach the second course, which is based on religious manuals and literature from Romania, the United States, and Germany.

The law mandates immunization of all children before they may enroll in kindergarten. It does not provide an exemption for religious reasons.

The Anti-Discrimination Council, established by law, is an independent institution charged with reviewing complaints of discrimination, including discrimination of a religious character or based on religious affiliation. Parliament chooses council members through a competitive process, appointing them to five-year terms. The council does not have sanctioning powers; however, it may determine if an act of discrimination took place, offer advice on a remedy, and request prosecutors to

initiate criminal proceedings. It may also suggest pertinent legislative amendments or participate in working groups authoring legislative initiatives.

According to the law, male citizens between the ages of 18 and 27 have the right to choose alternative civilian service over military service if the latter runs counter to their religious beliefs. Those who choose civilian service may complete it at public institutions or enterprises specializing in areas such as social assistance, healthcare, industrial engineering, urban planning, road construction, environmental protection, agriculture or agricultural processing, town management, and fire rescue. There are no blanket exemptions for religious groups from alternative civilian service, but higher-ranking clergy, monks, and theology students are exempted from such service. Refusal to enroll in civilian service is punishable by a fine up to 32,500 lei (\$1,800) or between 100 and 150 hours of community service, and those punished are still obliged to enroll in civilian service.

The law mandates restoration of rights and compensation for material damages for victims of the totalitarian regimes that controlled Moldovan territory between 1917 and 1991 and for citizens who were subject to reprisals based on political, national, religious, or social grounds. The law specifically refers to private property restoration for victims of the Soviet era but makes no mention of Holocaust-era property confiscations. The law does not apply to communal property confiscated from religious groups.

In June, the President signed into law legislation making Holocaust denial and insulting the memory of the Holocaust criminal offenses, with penalties ranging from six months' to five years' imprisonment and fines ranging from 25,000 to 50,000 lei (\$1,400-\$2,800). The offenses include the production, sale, distribution, or public use of fascist, racist, or xenophobic symbols or ideology, unless used for art, science, or education. The law amends the Criminal Code and the Law on Freedom of Speech to prohibit Holocaust denial and the promotion of xenophobia, racism, fascism, and hatred and violence on ethnic, racial, or religious grounds.

The law defines as "extremist" and makes illegal any document or information justifying war crimes or the complete or partial annihilation of a religious or other societal group, as well as any document calling for or supporting activities in pursuit of those goals.

Foreign missionaries may submit work contracts or volunteer agreements to apply for temporary residency permits and may reside and work in paid status or as

unpaid volunteers. Only missionaries working with registered religious groups may apply for temporary residency permits. Foreign religious workers with these permits must register with the National Agency for Employment and the Bureau for Migration and Asylum. They must present documents confirming the official status of the registered religious group for which they will work, papers confirming their temporary residence, and proof of valid local health insurance. Foreign missionaries belonging to registered religious groups who do not wish to apply for temporary residency may remain in the country for 90 days on a tourist visa.

The law states that “acts of vandalism and desecration of tombs, monuments, or places revered by persons belonging to various religious groups” are subject to penalties of up to two years’ imprisonment or 180-240 hours of community service, and a maximum fine of 47,500 lei (\$2,700).

In separatist Transnistria, Transnistrian “law” affirms the special role of the Orthodox Church in the region’s culture and spirituality. The “law” recognizes respect for Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Judaism, and other religious groups historically present in the region. All religious groups, whether registered or not, officially have freedom to worship, but the “law” permits restrictions on the right to freedom of conscience and religion “if necessary to protect the constitutional order, morality, health, citizens’ rights and interests, or state defense and security.”

Transnistrian “law” prohibits proselytizing in private homes and limits distribution of religious literature to houses of worship and special premises designated by the authorities. It also bans the involvement of children under 18 in religious organizations and mandatory religious classes against their will or without prior consent from their parents or legal guardians. It requires the reregistration of religious groups to operate legally in the region and stipulates groups that failed to reregister by the end of 2010 are “subject to liquidation.” The region’s registration “authority” registers religious groups and monitors their adherence to the goals and activities set forth in their statutes. Registration provides several advantages to religious groups, including the ability to own and build places of worship, open religious schools, conduct religious services in penitentiary institutions, and publish literature.

To register as a religious organization in Transnistria, a local religious group must present the following: proof of activity in the region for at least 10 years; a list of at least 10 members aged 18 years or older who have Transnistrian “citizenship” and permanent residence in one of the seven administrative-territorial units in the region; a list of founders and governing members and their personal details; the

charter, statutes, and minutes of its constituent assembly; the organization's basic religious doctrine; contact details of its governing body; the origin of financial resources for the organization's activity and other assets; and a receipt indicating payment of the registration fee. Local religious groups may also register as part of a centralized religious organization, which must consist of at least three local religious groups that have previously registered separately as legal entities. In that case, their application must additionally include a copy of the registration papers of the centralized organization. Centralized religious organizations must inform the registration "authority" on a yearly basis about intentions to extend their activities to cover additional local groups.

Transnistrian "authorities" must decide to register a religious group within 30 days of the application. If those authorities decide to conduct a "religious assessment" – a law enforcement investigation of the group's background and activities – registration may be postponed for up to six months or denied if investigating authorities determine the group poses a threat to the security or morality of the region or if foreign religious groups are involved in its activities.

According to the "law," foreign religious groups may not register or undertake religious activities. Foreign citizens have the freedom to worship, including with registered religious groups, but they may not be founders or members of religious groups.

Religious groups disband on their own decision or upon a Transnistrian "court" decision. The "prosecutor's office" or de facto executive, city, or district authorities may request the "courts" to disband or suspend a religious group on multiple grounds. Such grounds include the following: disturbing public order or violating public security; conducting activities deemed to be extremist; coercing persons into breaking up their families; infringing on citizens' identity, rights, and freedoms; violating citizens' morality and well-being; using psychotropic substances, drugs, hypnosis, or perverse activities during religious activities; encouraging suicide or the refusal of medical treatment for religious reasons; obstructing compulsory education; using coercion for alienation of property to the benefit of the religious community; and encouraging refusal to fulfill civic duties.

Transnistrian "law" allows the use of private homes and apartments to hold religious services. It does not, however, allow religious groups to use homes and apartments as their officially registered addresses. The "law" also allows such groups to hold religious services and rituals in public places, such as hospitals, clinics, orphanages, geriatric homes, and prisons.

Transnistrian “authorities” screen and may ban the import or export of religious printed materials, audio and video recordings, and other religious items.

According to the “law,” citizens have the right to choose alternative civilian service over military service if the latter contradicts an individual’s religion and beliefs. De facto authorities prioritize alternative civilian service in armed forces units, so they may assign conscientious objectors to perform their civilian service in military units. Another alternative is service at institutions subordinate to the “executive bodies of the state or local administration.”

De facto authorities do not allow religious groups to participate in elections or other political party activities or to support political parties or NGOs involved in elections.

A July 2021 “law” requires religious organizations that were active in the Transnistria region before November 14, 2016, to register again with de facto authorities by the end of 2021. Another provision specifies which entities are responsible for different aspects of monitoring religious organizations: the region’s “prosecution office” monitors the observance of the “law” on freedom of worship and religious organizations, the registering “authority” makes sure that religious groups observe their statutes, while local “authorities” monitor observance of notification requirements about the initiation or continuation of a religious group’s activities.

The July “law” allows missionary and preaching activities through the media, the internet, or other legal means. Religious organizations or their representatives may practice such activities in religious buildings, places of pilgrimage, cemeteries, educational institutions historically used for religious teaching, and in other public places in line with the “law on public assembly.” Religious organizations may hold services with their members in private homes, but proselytizing is banned in private homes. Foreign or stateless citizens legally residing in Transnistria may engage in such activities only if the religious organization involved is registered in the relevant territorial unit. The “law” bans missionary and preaching activities that violate public order or security, promote extremism, harm the traditional family, or harm citizens’ health or morality.

Moldova is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Government Practices

During the year, the PSA registered all 21 religious entities that applied. These were new religious subgroups belonging to existing religious denominations, including the Baptist Church, MOC, BOC, and Union of Pentecostal Churches. The PSA registered all 29 that applied in 2020.

On October 12, the Ministry of Justice removed the Falun symbol, which contains one large and four small swastikas, from its register of extremist materials. This followed a 2020 ruling by the Supreme Court of Justice that reversed the government's earlier decision to dissolve the Falun Gong and Falun Dafa Associations in accordance with lower court rulings starting in 2013 that stated that the two associations violated the law against extremism by using the swastika as symbols on the emblem. Both the Falun Gong and Falun Dafa Associations were able to reregister with the PSA in 2020. The two associations had used the swastika symbol based on Buddhist and Chinese tradition.

During the year, the ECHR ruled on two cases filed by the Falun Dafa Association. In the first case, on June 29, the ECHR ordered the government to pay 4,500 euros (\$5,100) in damages and 1,500 euros (\$1,700) in costs and expenses to the Falun Dafa association for violating Articles 9 and 11 of the European Convention on Human Rights by deciding to dissolve that association and the Falun Gong. Citing a procedural mistake in the application, the court dismissed the second case, in which the Falun Dafa sought compensation for the authorities' 2010 cancelation of a performance by Shen Yun Performing Arts, a Falun Gong-affiliated performance group from New York, reportedly because of pressure from the Chinese government. A third case before the court, submitted by the Falun Dafa in 2020, which alleged a violation of the group's right to peaceful assembly after the Chisinau mayor's office denied group members permission to hold a rally during the visit of a Chinese delegation in 2017, remained pending at year's end.

During the year, a dispute continued between the BOC and the MOC concerning the government's registration of a village church in Dereneu, Calarasi Region. In 2020, BOC representatives accused the PSA of illegally registering the church under the MOC's authority. The BOC officials said the church belonged to their denomination, although its status had been under dispute since 2017, when the parish and parishioners decided to switch legally and canonically from the MOC to the BOC. In October, BOC Secretary Archdeacon Maxim Sturza stated that both the BOC and MOC congregations were using the Dereneu church; the local BOC priest was conducting BOC church services in a chapel in the church courtyard, while the MOC priest held services in the disputed main church. According to

MOC leaders, the local priest in Dereneu decided to join the BOC and started the conflict after refusing to follow disciplinary sanctions imposed by the MOC church that he was serving previously. The BOC's lawyer said a total of 12 cases related to the BOC-MOC conflict in Dereneu were under review in courts at year's end.

The Catholic Diocese of Chisinau's written complaints to the government that registration law provisions pertaining to the organization of religious groups were incompatible with Catholic canon law remained unaddressed at year's end. According to Catholic Church representatives, canon law grants bishops the authority to organize new parishes and appoint priests, while Moldovan law requires that newly registered religious communities be created through the initiative of community members, with leadership chosen by the members.

During the year, the Extraordinary National Public Health Commission maintained COVID-19 related restrictions for religious gatherings, including mandatory mask requirement indoors, social distancing, and regular cleaning of spaces used for religious services. On March 23, then interim Prime Minister Aureliu Ciocoi met with representatives of several Christian groups, including the MOC, BOC, the Baptist Church, and the Catholic Church and called on them to adopt stricter health precautions to prevent mass infection during the upcoming Easter holidays; the religious leaders expressed willingness to do so. In a similar meeting with MOC Metropolitan Vladimir on March 20, President Maia Sandu and her healthcare advisor asked that the Church encourage worshippers to wear masks, maintain social distance, and avoid large gatherings. The Metropolitan rebroadcast the Presidency's report of the meeting but did not comment further.

In March, Chisinau's Extraordinary Healthcare Commission ruled that church services should be held outside, while several governates with high infection rates suspended church services altogether. In April and May, the National Emergency Situations Commission decreed an exception to the State of Emergency and allowed outdoor church services nationwide for the two weeks of Easter holiday celebrations as long as churches observed pandemic safety precautions.

Media reported that a number of Orthodox churches held services in contravention of these provisions, and that several of the responsible priests were fined by local police. In August, media reported that a group of 200 Orthodox priests and monks joined an anti-vaccination protest at the Parliament and Presidency buildings. Media said the event was organized by three NGOs with unspecified religious affiliation, allegedly under the direction of the MOC Bishop of Ungheni and

Nisporeni. The MOC dissociated itself from the event, stating that vaccination was voluntary and could help stop the pandemic.

The JCM again said the government did not properly maintain most Jewish cemeteries across the country or protect them from acts of vandalism. The JCM continued to request an investigation of government work conducted in 2018-19, which the JCM said significantly damaged the large Jewish cemetery in Chisinau, after the Prosecutor General's Office declined to open a case in November 2020. In August 2020, the JCM asked the Office of the Prosecutor General to investigate what it said was "large-scale damage, including the destruction and vandalism of tombstones, which are monuments of cultural and religious value." The Office of the Prosecutor General declined, citing insufficient evidence of a crime.

The project, first announced by the government in 2018, to open a Jewish museum remained on hold at year's end in the absence of a final decision on the museum's location, or clarity on the use of funds earlier earmarked for the project. The project would include the Jewish cemetery in Chisinau and a Yad Vashem-style Jewish historical and cultural center.

In June, the Orhei office of the PSA rejected the JCM's application for registration of a synagogue in Orhei city. The building had been transferred to JCM ownership by a 2014 Orhei city council decision. The JCM filed a complaint to the PSA against the "arbitrary actions" of the agency in this case, but the PSA took no further action on the synagogue's registration by year's end. In October, the government approved the construction of a Holocaust memorial in Orhei, to be built with Orhei city budget resources. The memorial will honor the memory of approximately 4,000 Jews from Orhei killed in 1941-1945.

Leaders of the Islamic League stated that the Police National Investigations Inspectorate, which launched an "unprecedented" investigation of the League's finances and assets in 2020, including the source of funds the league used to purchase the building that houses the Chisinau Mosque, discontinued the investigation in April. While the league leaders did not receive any official notification from the police, they said they thought the investigation was closed for lack of evidence of any illegalities.

Minority religious groups reported isolated problems obtaining construction permits for houses of worship from local authorities; they said these problems were not significant obstacles to their activities.

The government continued not to act on previous attempts by the Jewish, Catholic, and Lutheran communities to regain title to property confiscated during the Soviet era or to obtain similar properties. In contrast, the MOC continued to have use of, and exercise control over, most confiscated “historic” religious properties under a 2003 agreement with the Ministry of Culture, although the government retained title to the properties.

Based on a challenge brought by the MOC and the Ministry of Culture, on October 18, the Supreme Court of Justice overturned a 2020 ruling by the Chisinau Court of Appeals that annulled earlier agreements transferring more than 800 monasteries and churches held as national heritage monuments from the state to the MOC for “indefinite use and protection.” The court also ordered a retrial. BOC lawyers stated that the churches and monasteries legally belonged to the BOC; they said the ruling was unjustified and baseless. MOC representatives said they remained open to resuming negotiations for an amicable settlement which would divide the properties between the two Churches, but they stated the BOC had previously turned down their offer.

In December, the ECHR rejected as inadmissible a property dispute case filed by the Catholic Church against the government in 2012. The disputed property, currently part of the Presidency building complex, was a Catholic school nationalized during the Soviet era. In its ruling, the ECHR said the Catholic Church failed to exhaust all domestic remedies to return the property as required under the 2002 government decision that allowed religious groups to claim the right of ownership of some properties from local authorities.

Jehovah’s Witness leaders reported that all their cases related to obtaining zoning permits for Kingdom Halls were resolved and they had completed construction of all the Kingdom Halls they had planned to build throughout the country.

The Union of Pentecostal Churches continued to state that it remained unable to obtain a zoning permit for a building in Copceac village it bought in 2006 and used for religious services. The Pentecostal Church’s 2020 appeal of a lower court ruling against it was pending at year’s end, and the local Copceac congregation was in search of a new location for its church.

The MOC continued to maintain a network of social assistance sites, including daycare centers and temporary shelters within churches and monasteries, and to provide spiritual guidance and services to police officers, state workers, and prison

inmates. Other registered religious groups had access to state facilities upon request.

According to minority religious groups, respect for religious freedom and official attitudes towards religious minorities improved during the year because a new government, which took office in August, emphasized support for religious diversity. Officials from the new government attended public events with the MOC, BOC, Catholic Church, Jewish Community, Pentecostal Church, and other minority groups. However, minority groups said the MOC continued to enjoy advantageous treatment under the law.

In June, the President signed into law legislation making Holocaust denial and insulting the memory of the Holocaust criminal offenses. The legislation was proposed by the Socialist Party when it was in government and had been promoted by the Jewish community since 2013.

On multiple occasions during the year, particularly during the electoral campaign for July 11 snap parliamentary elections, Socialist Party leader and former president Igor Dodon voiced support for the Orthodox faith, and for the MOC in particular. He also publicized many of his visits or donations to the Church and campaigned for a Socialist candidate for the local elections in Balti while speaking before a church congregation in that city. Local analysts said the Socialist Party ran more explicitly religiously-focused campaigns than other major political parties, in some cases campaigning with MOC priests.

According to the PSA, 123 religious groups (compared with 111 in 2020) received funds from income tax payments voluntarily directed to religious groups.

Actions by Foreign Forces and Nonstate Actors

Jehovah's Witnesses reported what they said was a worsening of their situation in the Transnistria region, a separatist area internationally recognized as part of Moldova that hosts a significant Russian military presence without Moldova's consent. Transnistrian "authorities" continued to refuse to reregister two local Jehovah's Witnesses groups in Tiraspol and Ribnita. The Tiraspol community applied to reregister in 2020; the Ribnita community did so in 2019. Jehovah's Witnesses also reported problems with conscientious objection to military service, saying the "authorities" forced its members to undertake alternative civilian service within the Transnistrian "Ministry of Defense," which they stated was also contrary to their beliefs.

The Jehovah's Witnesses community reported that two 2019 cases filed in local "courts" by conscientious objectors against the Military Enrollment Committee remained unresolved. The two individuals remained exempt from service while their cases were pending. A 2018 case filed by the "Ministry of Justice" in the Ribnita city court seeking the dissolution of the Jehovah's Witnesses group there remained pending at year's end. Jehovah's Witnesses leaders voiced concern regarding the imminent closure of their facility in Ribnita, and over the de facto authorities' use of vague "laws" to impede or limit their ability to engage in religious activities.

In April, the JCM reached an agreement with the Israel-based Tkumat-Rashkov (Rebirth of Rashkov) Fund, which bought a ruined historical synagogue in Rashkov village, Camenca Region to renovate under a UN Development Program project.

The Muslim community remained unable to secure a location for a mosque and a Muslim educational and cultural center in Tiraspol. In 2019, de facto authorities in the city granted the community a building permit and offered a plot of public land to build on, but they later withdrew their offer of public land.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

The JCM reported instances of antisemitic hate speech and instigation to discrimination and violence against the Jewish community, especially on the internet. Several online articles related to the Jewish community received discriminatory comments, which are not prohibited on online platforms. For example, in response to an article about the last Jewish citizen evacuated from Afghanistan, anonymous authors posted comments such as "as always, there is no Holocaust for them," or "plus, minus one (Jewish citizen), not a great loss." The news portal did not take any action to remove the antisemitic comments.

Unlike in previous years, most other religious minorities, including the Muslim community, Jehovah's Witnesses, and the Pentecostal and Baptist Churches, did not report religiously motivated incidents against their members. These groups attributed the absence of incidents to continued COVID-19 restrictions that shifted attention away from religious minorities, as well as what they said was a higher level of societal acceptance of minority religious groups.

According to the BOC, MOC priests, local authorities, and MOC followers continued to harass and clash verbally with members and clergy of the church in Dereneu village, which in 2017 switched from the MOC to the BOC.

In Razeni village, Ialoveni Region, a family conflict between a BOC priest and a church owner escalated into a conflict between the MOC and the BOC. When a BOC priest died in 2020, his sister registered the BOC church at Razeni in which he had been serving as her private property, forcibly removed the new BOC priest, her nephew, from the church, and locked the building so no one could enter. She then submitted a request to the MOC to delegate a priest and transfer the church from BOC to MOC authority. BOC members and the BOC priest were later able to enter the church building. The MOC sent a priest who, in August, together with a group of villagers, again forced the BOC priest out of the church and locked the building. After multiple confrontations, which resulted in some minor property damage but no serious injuries, the BOC priest and a group of supporters were able to reenter the church in October and at year's end were guarding it to prevent further attempts by the MOC priest and his adherents to reenter the building.

According to the JCM, individuals and groups again made insulting and antisemitic statements in some news portals' online comments sections, including blaming the Jewish community for the spread of COVID-19. The JCM said that the news portals did not take responsibility for editing individuals' comments on their websites, and there remained no legal avenues to complain about discriminatory language online.

The JCM reported a case of harassment of a rabbi in a public park in Chisinau. On July 7, as he was walking in the central park, the rabbi was approached by an unknown individual who said to him, "Too bad the Germans did not exterminate you all during the war." The rabbi was able to take a picture of the aggressor and made a short recording of the incident. The JCM sent a complaint to the police, but in August the police refused to initiate a criminal investigation, citing a lack of evidence of a crime.

The Jewish community reported vandalism at the Jewish memorial in Cosauti. Between July 29 and August 2, unknown individuals defaced and damaged a monument honoring the memory of more than 6,000 Jews killed in the Cosauti forest during the Holocaust. The police opened an investigation but had not found the perpetrators by the end of the year. The JCM reported no progress on a 2020 criminal investigation into the vandalism of tombs in the Jewish cemetery in Chisinau that year.

The JCM reported reconstruction of the Rabbi Tsirelson Synagogue and Yeshiva in Chisinau continued under a new permit issued by authorities in 2020 but which had been delayed due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Islamic League leaders said that societal acceptance of Muslims had improved in general, and no cases of harassment or societal discrimination were reported during the year.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

In meetings with government officials from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and European Integration, Ministry of Education and Research, and Ministry of Culture, the Ambassador and other embassy officials raised religious freedom issues, including Holocaust remembrance, the protection and preservation of Jewish heritage sites, initiatives to establish a Jewish heritage museum, and the need to advance religious and communal property restitution.

Embassy officials held meetings with leaders from the MOC and BOC, as well as with representatives of Christian, Muslim, Jewish, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Falun Dafa groups, to encourage respect and tolerance for all religious groups, encourage interfaith cooperation, and to highlight religious freedom as a U.S. government priority policy goal. Embassy officers also raised issues of religious freedom for religious minorities in the Transnistria region with de facto authorities there.

In January, during the Holocaust remembrance week, the Ambassador participated in a virtual Holocaust remembrance roundtable hosted by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and European Integration. He said the participants had come together to "honor the millions lost, to celebrate their sacred memories, and rededicate themselves to ensure that no such atrocity will ever happen again." The Ambassador stated it was important to educate younger generations about the horrors of the Holocaust and the dangers of hate groups. While highlighting the Ministry of Education's efforts to introduce an optional Holocaust education course, he said he hoped to see further progress until Holocaust education was part of the curriculum for all students in the country. He also called for restorative justice for Holocaust victims' families and communities, including the return of historic cemeteries, synagogues, and yeshivas to their rightful heirs and the creation of a Museum of Jewish History. The Ambassador said the United States was providing assistance in these efforts. Local media reported on the event,

which was extensively amplified in JCM news media, including publication of the Ambassador's full remarks in the JCM newspaper.

Also, as part of the Holocaust remembrance week, the Ambassador provided prerecorded remarks for an online commemoration organized by the Kishinev Jacobs Jewish Center entitled, "The Righteous Among the Nations from Moldova, Germany, the USA, and Japan." Embassy officials laid flowers at the Memorial to the Victims of the Chisinau Ghetto and attended a virtual conference on mapping and protecting the country's Jewish cemeteries. The embassy hosted a discussion on how Holocaust education could contribute to the prevention of genocide and violence against religious minorities. The embassy highlighted an embassy official's participation in the JCM's Sukkot holiday celebration in September, emphasizing the importance of religious tolerance and diversity to both the American and Moldovan peoples.

The Charge d'Affaires and Minister of Culture Sergiu Prodan announced on September 27 the last phase of a joint effort to restore the Assumption of the Virgin Mary Church in Causeni. The embassy provided an additional \$290,000 contribution through the Ambassador's Fund for Cultural Preservation, bringing total U.S. support to more than \$1 million.